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Four literary portrayals of education and religion in the lives of college-aged African American women during and after the civil rights movement

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CHAPTER I, INTRODUCTION:

Literature is a direct reflection of human lives and interactions and can lead to insights about people, history, and cultures. This can be seen in works of fiction as well as autobiographical texts that give the reader critical information of relevance, and it is no different within the works of African American women in the United States. Historically, African American culture has valued education for its members since the time of emancipation as education was seen as a critical need for newly freed blacks. Education was believed to have "a direct connection" to freedom (Raboteau 67). Because of this concept, higher education was thought to bring opportunities for a better life. But higher education was not always accessible to African American women. This situation is evident in the autobiographies of Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), and Gloria Watkins (bell hooks), *Wounds of Passion* (1997), and in the fictional stories about Meridian Hill in Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) and Virginia King in Rita Dove's *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992).

During and after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's, much change occurred for African American women seeking a higher education, and these four texts are excellent examples of the environment of higher education at the time because all four of the literary characters pursued education as part of their passion in life even if it was against the status quo. Many African American women before them were not allowed to pursue education even at the elementary level, let alone in a collegiate setting. The opportunities that were given to each character ideally should have brought only positive experiences and outcomes. This thesis looks

more deeply into each work to see if that is entirely true by closely examining these books and the attitudes expressed in them as a representation of values within the culture where the characters lived. Childhood experiences and the attitudes encountered by children shape the lives adults live and the paths they take. The people who help raise a girl have a lasting impact on that girl throughout her life inside and outside of the home. This is certainly true for the four protagonists in *Coming of Age in Mississippi, Wounds of Passion, Meridian,* and *Through the Ivory Gate.*

Not only has higher education been seen as a cultural value for African Americans, but religion has been a source for strength for the members of that community as well. The four main characters, all African American women, are each exposed to the religious aspect of their culture. The question is whether or not this specific aspect of the culture remained sustaining for the women involved. The experiences of the main characters Anne Moody, Gloria Watkins, Meridian Hill, and Virginia King can lead to knowledge about the presence of religion in African American women's lives near the time of the Civil Rights Movement. At this time in American history much change occurred within the African American culture, including the religious community of the culture. While the women in these four novels looked to the future for change, their parents belonged to a church that was not yet in search of ways to improve the lives of African Americans in the United States. According to Andrew Billingsley, author of *Mighty Like a River (*1999), "...during the era of World War II into the 1950's, the focus of this church and all its activities was on helping to prepare its parishioners for the life in the hereafter" (3).

The focus was not improvement of the current life full of suffering, but salvation after death, a focus which created conflict for these women. All of these women looked for ways to empower themselves and other women, and thus found new paths to take that led them to personal satisfaction and fulfillment.

The experiences of religion and education go hand in hand and can have great impact upon personal and social values. From close analysis of *Coming of Age in Mississippi, Wounds of Passion, Meridian,* and *Through the Ivory Gate* individually, tentative conclusions can be drawn about the culture in which the characters lived and its attitudes towards women in education as well as about religion as a major facet of life. Each character's personal experiences in religion and higher education were both positive and negative as this close analysis reveals.

Even though these four books were published over a thirty year (1968-1997) span, each text relates to the other three through similar experiences as well as individual experiences of each character. By examining works completed by four different authors, diverse backgrounds can be studied in order to compare similar outcomes. *Coming of Age in Mississippi, Wounds of Passion, Meridian,* and *Through the Ivory Gate* all give personal narratives that directly reflect the culture each woman was a part of, while still maintaining individuality specific to each novel. Anne Moody, Gloria Watkins, Meridian Hill, and Virginia King are all members of an oppressed gender and race in an oppressed societal class, whose members are often overlooked by the dominant American culture. These four novels draw attention to the reality that African American women's lives have been frequently subject to suppression because of the dominant American culture's orientation to

accommodate the needs of white, upper-class men. This document closely examines each character's experiences pertaining to education and religion from childhood into adulthood in order to discover if education and religion were a sustaining, positive experience or an overall negative experience because of cultural attitudes about the roles of African American women were expected to play. The change in attitude for each character as she matures is also important to study as an actual representation of events and personal experiences for true understanding.

Timeline

1940- Anne Moody born

1944- Alice Walker born

1952- Gloria Watkins and Rita Dove born

1954- Brown vs. Board of Education

1963- March on Washington, Medgar Evers and President John F. Kennedy killed

1964- Civil Rights Act passed

1965- Voting Rights Act passed, Malcolm X assassinated

1968- *Coming of Age in Mississippi* published, Martin Luther King, Jr. killed

1975- The United States withdraws from Vietnam

1976- *Meridian* published

1992- *Through the Ivory Gate* published

1997- *Wounds of Passion* published

CHAPTER II, THE MEMOIRS:

Coming of Age in Mississippi (1968) by Anne Moody

Author's Biography

Anne Moody divided her autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi,* into four major parts: Childhood, High School, College, and the Movement. It is the story of an African American girl growing up in segregated, rural Southern Mississippi during the 1940's, 1950's, and into the 1960's. Her childhood experiences exemplify the life that Black Americans were forced to live in those decades while attempting to survive. Anne, born in 1940, portrays the financial, emotional, and personal struggles in the life of her impoverished family, as well as others within her community. Anne's childhood experiences as the daughter of sharecroppers who eventually divorced included watching as her mother searched for acceptance for Anne and her siblings as well as herself in the family of Anne's stepfather Raymond. Anne was raised to fear white people and be submissive at all costs even though she had white friends and worked for one white family that treated her like a daughter. Anne's life was filled with racism, and not solely from the white people around her. Within her African American community an element of colorism existed. The individuals with a dark skin color were often looked down upon and made to feel inferior because of their darker skin color. Light skin was the desired color to be born with according to some members of Anne's community.

Anne desired more out of life than what seemed to be available, so she tried hard for success in school. From an early age, Anne worked in the homes of wealthy white families in her community of Centreville, Mississippi, mainly to earn

money for her and her siblings to attend school. This work ethic followed Anne into high school as she continued to work for white families, attend classes, play basketball, take piano lessons, and maintain a high level of involvement in church activities. Even though Anne was continually busy at home, she wanted to discover what opportunities existed at college.

Higher education became available to Anne through a basketball scholarship to Natchez College in Natchez, Mississippi. Upon completing two years at Natchez, Anne received an academic scholarship to pay her tuition at Tougaloo College. It was through numerous organizations at Tougaloo that Anne became involved in the Civil Rights Movement, which was pivotal. Anne was motivated by injustices throughout her life and by witnessing racist violence across the South. Anne participated in the initial Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in in Jackson, Mississippi and was arrested numerous times for her actions in the Civil Rights Movement. Her involvement in this movement became the central aspect of her life, and Anne was motivated only by the work done in the Movement.

While Anne was a child, she was sheltered from knowledge of those working for equal rights because of her family and community's fear of the repercussions. Discussion about the death of Emmet Till was not allowed, and her teachers avoided questions about the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Yet Anne was aware of the violent murders of people because of their skin color: Medgar Evers, Anne's uncle, Martin Luther King, Jr., and numerous members of her community. Anne's life was different from the lives of the rest of her family. Her siblings and mother did not understand Anne's life and often tried to

discourage her because of their immense fear. After college Anne discovered her picture on the Ku Klux Klan's blacklist, and that was one of the scariest moments of her life. Anne's civil rights work put her life in constant danger, yet she continued to work because of her passion. Upon leaving college, Anne continued to work in voter registration drives for African Americans in Mississippi even though it was physically and emotionally draining. Although Anne spent much of her college days working for the Movement, she finally became frustrated and disillusioned with it all and chose to leave it. After leaving the Civil Rights Movement, Anne moved north and wrote her memoir out of the public eye.

Education

While Anne Moody (called Essie Mae at the time) was a child, education was important to her personally and also appeared to be important to those around her, including her mother, Toosweet. Even though Toosweet did not attend classes after elementary school in order to get a job to help support herself and the rest of her family, she still felt Anne's future within the culture was linked to her abilities inside the classroom. The reasons that Anne's mother wanted Anne to study hard and become an educated person pertained directly to status in the African-American community. Because Anne was a dark- skinned black girl, Toosweet felt a higher status needed to be attained. This was supposed to occur through education. In Moody's autobiography, she recalls her mother stating, "Y'all gotta do good in school. Y'all can't let Darlene and Cherie be smarter than y'all. They already think they is better than y'all 'cause they is yellow" (52). Her mother felt Anne was at a

disadvantage because of her skin color and needed to find a way to obtain a level of equality with those with a perceived more desirable skin color.

This goal of obtaining a higher social status was not Anne's sole motivation to become an educated woman. Anne felt that she was smarter than most of the other children in her classes, as well as her younger brother and sister, and she wanted to learn. Various opportunities became available through her classroom success. Anne's intelligence and capabilities were recognized by the white people in her community for whom she worked. During this time in American history, white people from Mississippi did not often find compliments to give to African Americans, yet Anne was able to receive encouragement from numerous members of the white upper-class in her community because of her intelligence.

One of Anne's employers, Mrs. Burke, hired Anne to tutor her youngest son Wayne and his friends on their algebra. The money that Anne received for this tutoring enabled her to purchase items that were not affordable by many of her peers at her school. During the 1960's in Southern Mississippi, white and black students did not socialize together because of the segregation of the society, yet Anne found herself equal or superior academically to numerous white students her age. Because of this experience, Anne and Wayne developed "an open friendship" (149). Without her continued education, she would not have been able to experience a friendship with a person outside of her race at this time. This friendship may not have been accepted by Wayne's mother, but it was a positive occurrence that Anne experienced because of her education and ability to teach others. Up to that point, Anne was more fearful of white people than she was aware

that friendships could exist. Anne Moody's experience tutoring white students in algebra allowed her to grow personally as well as financially. While Mrs. Burke was not supportive of Anne and Wayne's friendship and treated Anne in a negative way, the positive elements of the experience appeared to outweigh the negative ones. Mrs. Burke was disapproving of most of what Anne did because of her race, not because of her abilities.

Wayne Burke was not the only member of his family to appreciate Anne's classroom abilities. His grandmother, Mrs. Crosby, also encouraged Anne to take advantage of her smartness. She told Anne one day, "You study hard in school, Essie. When you finish, I am going to help you go to college. You will be a great math teacher one day" (154). Most African American girls growing up in Southern Mississippi did not anticipate going to college, but Anne was encouraged by various individuals, even including white people. She might not have considered pursuing higher education had she not been encouraged at a young age. Many white people in the 1960's did not feel that African Americans should be educated at all, let alone seek a college degree. However, when Anne decided to stop working for Mrs. Burke because of how poorly she treated Anne, Mrs. Crosby renewed her offer to aid Anne in her pursuit of higher education. While saying good-bye to Anne, Mrs. Crosby stated, "And remember when you are ready for college let me know, and I'll help you" (157). This moment was extremely important for Anne even though she may not have realized it at the time. Receiving encouragement is important for any young person looking to continue being educated, and it may have been more

important for someone who did not receive much other positive encouragement during her young life.

Regardless of Toowsweet's desire for Anne to have academic superiority, Anne's mother gave her much support for finding a good husband and starting a family. College was not what Toosweet wanted for Anne; she would have preferred her daughter to stay at home, find a husband, and have children. Anne recalls a conversation with her mother about Mr. Hicks, a teacher of Anne's: "Once we were sitting on the porch when Hicks drove by and waved and Mama commented, 'I sho' wish I had married a schoolteacher.' Then I knew she was hoping I would marry Hicks" (185). It was not that Toosweet wanted Anne to find a good way of life for herself; rather Anne's mother felt the only way to survive was through marriage to an older man with a steady job. Toosweet felt that marrying a man was the only way to happiness even though she had not had the most happiness from the men in her own life. Christy Rishoi, author of *From Girl to Woman* (2003), states: "In an environment that valued black women primarily as domestic workers and sexual objects, Anne Moody pushed herself to scholastic achievement, economic self-sufficiency, and a sense of self-worth with little support or encouragement" (96). The success that Anne Moody found was not because of positive support from those around her; she developed her drive through adversity. Anne desired more from her life that what Toosweet wanted.

Religion

The concept of education was always evident in Anne's life as was religion. Religion was an almost daily presence in the young life of Anne Moody. The roles of

church and God in Anne's family were very prominent; the family participated in organized religion as well as the more personal daily affirmations of God. This presence was seen in the way that Toosweet, when she was happy, sang spirituals while doing her work:

> I got a shoe, you got a shoe,
> All of God's chillun got shoes
> When I get to hebben, I'm gonna put on my shoes
> And gonna tromp all over God's hebben
> When I get to hebben I'm gonna put on my shoes,
> And gonna walk all over God's hebben. (122)

Toosweet expressed her faith and the importance of God in her life. Her singing demonstrated a positive concept of God and what was to come and was a direct reflection of the history of African American Christianity. Spirituals were an important aspect of black slaves' worship style. According to Arthur J. Raboteau, author of *African American Religion* (1999), "Spirituals brought together Protestant hymns and African musical styles into a distinctly creative and expressive synthesis. People sang them at work and at prayer, in groups and alone" (52). Twosweet's spirituals bridged the religion of her parents and grandparents to her generation's Christianity. Toosweet made a positive impression on Anne about the religion that was part of their lives.

Not only did Toosweet bring religion into her family's home with her musical renditions, she made a conscious effort to get her children involved in organized religion. Just as she desired Anne to perform well in school at one point, Toosweet

looked for a social status that was derived from church attendance. Even though she belonged to the Mount Pleasant Church for numerous months, Toosweet wanted her children to attend the Centreville Baptist Church, the church of her husband's family. According to Moody, "It had seemed as though Mama had completely resigned herself to not being accepted, yet she was determined to make Raymond's people accept us, even in their church" (66). Attendance at the Centreville Baptist Church was the way that Toosweet thought her children would find acceptance in a higher social class. Toosweet wanted to use the worship services for acceptance into a particular group of people. Raboteau states, "...the church instilled in its members an intimate sense of place, of being comfortably at home..." (102). This belonging is what Toosweet was looking for her children to find. She wanted the members of the Centreville Baptist Church to provide her children with a sense of attachment and belonging to Raymond's church and thus into his family.

This situation created conflict in Anne's life when her mother changed her mind and decided that the children should become part of Toosweet's home congregation at the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church after all. The children had become actively involved in the Centreville church in the meantime, and "while we were doing all this at Centreville Baptist and winning the approval of all the church members there, Mama decided to go back to Mount Pleasant" (66). This change was confusing to the children and created questions about religion, church, and acceptance. Just as Anne was becoming a part of the Centreville social circle, her

mother took her away from it. This acceptance was soon replaced with the isolation of starting over in another church environment.

Even though Anne Moody had numerous confusing situations concerning her religious home, other aspects of her religious journey gave Anne a much different view of religious practices. While Anne was reluctant to be part of her mother's church, she became a candidate for baptism at Mount Pleasant in order to become a Christian:

> It seemed like I was floating in the air and I had lost sight of where I was. Something was behind me, pushing me. All I could hear was Sister Jones's singing and Reverend Tyson saying, 'Will you come, will you come tonight?' I could feel myself moving and I didn't know where I was going or what I was doing. I didn't see anybody. (74)

This experience did not actually make Anne feel happy or closer to Christ; instead, she felt anger towards her mother and others in her church because she felt she had been forced into the situation. What could have been a happy time, entering into the church, became full of angst for Anne Moody, who threatened to run away from home before the day of the baptism. Like others in her generation, Toosweet's main concern was the afterlife and the rewards in Heaven. Toosweet wanted this for Anne, and she felt that baptism made the road to Heaven easier for her daughter.

This experience of becoming a member of the Christian church did not leave Anne with a peaceful feeling or a sense of accomplishment. With the actual immersion in water being in a cattle pond full of mud and manure, Anne did not feel saved, only cold, wet, dirty, and angry. Anne's thoughts were, "As I waded into the

water, I could feel the mud sticking to my legs. I was mad as hell, and I heard Sister Jones's voice, 'Nothing but the righteous…' along with the rest, I thought, 'Nothing but the *righteous*. Some shit!'" (79). While seeing Anne complete this experience overjoyed her mother, Anne felt the opposite. She did not feel a sense of belonging or a closer relationship with God. This was the experience of religion and the Christian church that stayed with Anne Moody.

While she was a child, Anne did not have experiences pertaining to religion that motivated her to become an active member because of her desire for achievement that the church did not openly support. The church Anne's mother belonged to could not meet the needs of a young Anne Moody because this church shared the orientation of many in the lower classes. This is evident in theologian H. Richard Niebuhr's theories:

> Moreover, churches seek to accommodate to the larger society and, as such, accept the status quo. For this reason, these institutions fail to meet the needs of the lower classes, and particularly those who suffer from the most extreme forms of economic deprivation (Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto 136).

The society at this time was a racist society that did not give blacks hope for a better life in this world, and this was a major reason Anne could not lovingly accept her mother's tradition. This tradition did accept members as family yet did not find a way to enable those members to find growth away from the church and spirituality. Often times, spiritual needs were met, yet Anne did not feel the strong tie to this organization that her mother did.

Regardless of her feelings, Anne would not manage to escape the church and its members during her life. Anne encountered the Christian Church and its followers in her experiences at both colleges she attended and with the work she performed during the Civil Rights Movement because of the direct connection that the black church and the social movement had forged by then. These early religious experiences prepared Anne for interaction with members of the Christian community in her adult life even though she did not know what the future would bring for the African American Christian church.

Higher Education

After high school graduation and leaving Centreville, Anne also found unexpected experiences in college at Natchez in Mississippi. She had strong feelings about what the college and its campus would be like, but these were just wishful thinking. Upon arriving at Natchez College, Anne was not impressed; it was not what she had hoped it would be. She recalls, "I didn't want to get involved in this place. I didn't even want to see anyone connected with it" (219). Anne's hopes were shattered the instant she came to campus, before meeting anyone or having experiences. Anne expected beauty and found mediocrity.

Not only was the college's exterior disheartening to Anne, but she also found disappointment with the staff members at Natchez as well. Her initial employer at the college, Miss Harris, left a bad taste in Anne's mouth. Miss Harris treated students nicely only if she thought she would be able to obtain gossip about the happenings in the girls' dorm. Anne quickly realized what Miss Harris' motives were: "Miss Harris was the biggest Uncle Tom on campus" (221). Anne had hoped to leave

this sort of behavior behind when she left for college, but she did not. While Anne assumed freedom was going to come with college, she soon found that was wrong too. After only a short time at Natchez, she felt very strongly about it. According to Anne, "I had never in my entire life felt so much like a prisoner, not even when I worked for white Klan members at home" (224).

The hypocritical aspects of life at Natchez were overwhelming for Anne. Her high expectations left her open for a letdown, and that negative feeling made her question her education. Anne was not even sure if she was going to return to college in the fall because she was so unhappy in her first year of school. Anne's thoughts were, "By the time the school term ended, I was so sick of Natchez that I was sure I wouldn't return the following year" (228). Even though Anne's life away from college did not make her happy, she was not sure if Natchez College would ever fulfill the expectations she had for an institution of higher education.

Much like her experiences at Natchez College, the time Anne spent at Tougaloo College was not entirely positive. She felt intimidated before even stepping on campus because of the reputation that the school had with her classmates. Anne was afraid that she would not survive there because of her skin color. A peer informed her, "'Baby, you're too black. You gotta be high yellow with a rich-ass daddy" (239). Anne did not want to have to suffer through the school year because of her dark skin color, and she did not want to be intimidated because of it. Her view of Tougaloo turned out to be false; however, she still did not have a great experience during her last two years of college. Once Anne arrived on Tougaloo's campus and started attending classes, she still felt fearful about the situation she

was in. "I began to get scared all over again" (245). Anne was one of the many black students on campus, but she still was afraid of the situation because only one black faculty member existed. The memory of the experiences Anne had with whites while growing up in Mississippi made her feel intimidated and inferior even away from her racist home environment.

Anne also had monetary problems while at college. Tougaloo was expensive, and Anne had a difficult time affording it. Instead of obtaining financial and emotional support from her family members at home, Anne was forced to ask her younger sister, Adline, because Anne's mother was not allowed to send money to Anne. Even though Adline sent her money, Anne did not receive positive reinforcement about being in college even after two years. According to Anne, Adline "wrote me that she was sorry I had gone to Tougaloo when I knew I could not afford it" (250). Regardless of Anne's academic scholarship that paid her tuition, she still needed money in order to live. Anne's family rarely gave her positive reinforcement. With the environment of higher education already being moderately hostile, Anne's family's values did not create an easier situation for her.

The Civil Rights Movement

Anne became involved in organizations that also created more tension in her life. In Anne's first year at Tougaloo, she became involved in the Civil Rights Movement. She was a member of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), CORE (Congress of Racial Equity), and SNCC (Student Non-violence Coordinating Committee), which put her in danger much of the time with meetings, sit-ins, and demonstrations. The cause that Anne became

deeply involved in required much time and energy, which college students are expected to put into their schoolwork. This only made Anne feel more stressed and upset and further strained the relationship Anne had with her family members. Anne wanted to share her life and passion with her family, but this was not possible. The life her mother lived was very different from the way Anne lived; Anne tried to send information about the movement to her mother only to receive another cold response. The culture of Anne's hometown would not allow African Americans to seek equal rights. Anne's mother stated, "'Please don't send any more of that stuff here. I don't want nothing to happen to us here,' she said. 'If you keep that up, you will never be able to come home again'" (263). What Toosweet valued was the safety of her family in a racist community. This was not an attitude that was reserved to only Anne's mother. Rishoi states:

> Throughout her narrative, Moody represents her mother as a repressive force on a roughly equal level as that of whites, but she never explicitly recognizes the likely reasons for her mother's behavior. It has been necessary for black parents since slavery to train their children how to survive in the white world. This training sometimes looks cruel and spirit crushing from the outside, but there can be little doubt that it is done with love, with the goal of helping children survive in a world hostile to their presence. (100)

While Anne felt that her mother did not care about her passion, Toosweet may have been trying to protect Anne and the rest of the children in her family. Toosweet cared for her family even if it appeared that she did not because of her lack of

encouragement aimed at Anne. Toosweet was a product of what she was taught as an African American woman in the South during segregation.

Because Anne went to college, she was exposed to the fact that people could change their lives to make them better for the present and for the future. While Anne was often in physical danger herself, she was pivotal in bettering the lives of African Americans across the United States. In the initial sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi, Anne had a realization that would not have come from any classroom: "After the sit-in, all I could think of was how sick Mississippi whites were. They believed so much in their segregated Southern way of life, they would kill to preserve it" (267). She knew the seriousness of the situation she and her family lived in. Even though Anne was aware of how dangerous racist people were, her involvement in later movement activism was not as painful as when she was a student at Tougaloo College.

The Civil Rights Movement Anne was involved in made her want to be part of a college campus. When she was initially a college student, the most important aspect for her was graduating, but that changed when she found something bigger than herself. Anne discovered she would not graduate as she had planned and felt, "A year before, this would have seemed like a terrible disaster, but now I hardly felt disappointed. I had a good excuse to stay on campus for the summer and work for the Movement, and this was what I really wanted to do" (263). While Anne continued her work for the Civil Rights Movement on the Tougaloo College campus, she encountered students from all over the state who were not allowed the same involvement or even enrollment. Anne found that many other schools, such as

Jackson State, were what she considered "Uncle Tom schools" that would expel their students for arrests associated with the Movement (273). Even though being at college in Mississippi was bad for Anne, it was worse for other students.

While Anne was very deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement as a college student, she was in the minority once again because of her gender. The idea of the "subservient black woman" did not leave Anne when she left her hometown of Centreville. This concept was so embedded in her culture that Anne could not escape it even while performing work to improve the lives of Black men and women. Rishoi describes this: "Indeed, given the prominent role played by black men and the mostly unseen work performed by women in the civil rights movement, I would argue that the text exists in part to counter the unspoken assumption that a civil rights worker is always a black man" (94). Anne's work in the Movement and publication of this memoir drew attention to this fact even as women continued to work for equality through such hardship.

Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, the African American church was at the center of the struggle. This social movement was huge and needed leadership in order to motivate people and create change, and that leadership was found within the church. One public figure was needed to motivate and lead African Americans' struggle for civil rights and equality. Martin Luther King, Jr. was chosen to be that leader. King was only following in the footsteps of those before him. Both King's father and grandfather were preachers who led demonstrations for Black education and voting rights decades earlier (Raboteau 111-112). According to Raboteau:

> Throughout the civil rights movement, King drew upon the black

> church tradition to inspire the movement's participants, both black and white. He, and others, perceived his leadership as religious and his authority as moral....He defined the black freedom struggle as a moral and religious cause. (110)

Anne Moody felt strongly about the Movement's motivation and desire to create change even though Anne did not have the same faith and connection to God that many others did. Anne tended to agree with those who thought that civil rights were mainly a political and social fight outside of the church.

Nevertheless, much of Anne's work in the Movement was a reflection of the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr. While demonstrating as part of the Woolworth's lunch counter sit-ins, Anne was practicing the philosophy of nonviolent protest. Even while their racist opponents smeared the demonstrators with food, pulled them off their chairs, and beat them, Anne and her peers absorbed the abuse without a fight. Even though demonstrators faced horrific attacks at the hands of white police, "King argued that blacks had to use nonviolent methods to achieve their goals, not only because violence had no chance of success, but because nonviolence was the morally superior way to act" (Raboteau 113). By using this philosophy, Anne and her peers were bringing their political and social cause full circle back to Christian teachings and the Black church. Without consciously knowing, Anne was witness to the link between the church and the Movement.

Many people in the Movement looked to God for solace in a situation where people were abused or murdered because of their skin color, but that is not what Anne did. She felt further from religion now than she had as a small child, mainly

due to the anger that was expressed to Movement workers when they arrived at churches and were rejected by the white members of the church. According to Billingsley, the Movement, "... would bring out the worst in white Birmingham, including the white churches" (5). Even though Anne and her fellow Movement workers used Christian church services to raise awareness outside of Birmingham, she did not feel strongly connected to the God that people were worshipping inside the church walls. In a white church Anne recalled, "I was sitting there thinking any moment God would strike the life out of me. I recognized some of the whites, sitting around me in that church. If they were praying to the same God I was, then even God, I thought, was against me" (285). Anne had started to lose hope in her family, her education, her culture, and especially in God and religion. Anne was in a minority because of her spiritual isolation in this time of turmoil.

When Anne heard news of the church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama that killed numerous children in 1963, Anne's faith faltered more than it ever had. She became angry with and felt abandoned by God once again. Through her tears Anne told God:

> I'm through with you. Yes, I am going to put you down. From now on, I am my own God. I am going to live by the rules I set for myself. I'll discard everything I was once taught about you. Then I'll be you. I'll be my own God, living my life as I see fit. Not as Mr. Charlie says I should live it, or Mama, or anybody else. I shall do as I want in this society that apparently wasn't meant for me and my kind. If you are getting angry because I'm talking to you like this, then just kill me, leave me here in this

> graveyard dead. Maybe that's where all of us belong, anyway. Maybe then we wouldn't have to suffer so much. At the rate we are being killed now, we'll all soon be dead anyway. (318)

Anne's faith in God wavered while she suffered in life even though others in the same environment working for the same cause remained faithful that God would aid them.

Anne worked closely at Tougaloo with a white man named Reverend King and his wife, Jeanette. Through all the agony and discrimination, the Kings continued to feel God's work would help the Movement and the people involved. The Kings put themselves in danger aiding these Black students. Before Anne was aware that those associated with the white Christian church could be supportive of her cause, she assumed that a wall between whites and Blacks would always exist. Anne had a realization while at Tougaloo for her graduation:

> As we were all sitting there eating, I looked at Reverend King. And silently, I asked him to forgive me—forgive me for doubting him when he first came to Tougaloo. I think because he was a white native Mississippian almost every student from Tougaloo doubted him at that time. We had never before had a white Southerner on the faculty. His wife, Jeanette, was from Jackson. I remember, I used to look at her going in and out of the chapel after visiting Reverend King there and just hate the thought of a white Southern minister and his wife taking over the most beautiful and cherished building on campus. Now sitting across the table from them I realized I had more respect for them than any of the white

> Northern teachers on campus. And for that matter, any white persons I had ever known. (379)

It occurred to Anne that the Christian church of the whites that had oppressed her for her entire life could actually be liberating. Christianity and religion had more to offer than what Anne had thought for most of her young life. Regardless of this, Anne's outlook remained less than positive.

By the end of her memoir, Anne Moody also began to lose hope in the work she had performed for equality. With those around her on a bus to Washington, D.C. singing "We Shall Overcome," Anne wondered if that would ever be possible (384). Anne left the South and the Movement after working so tirelessly for numerous years in order to escape that environment. According to Rishoi, "after her memoir was published, Moody effectively vanished from public life, refusing to be interviewed or to answer the mail addressed to her that continues to pour in to her publisher" (108). The lack of resolution in Anne Moody's work reflects the life that she lived as a young African American searching for identity as an educated woman in a racist, sexist world after being brought up in the Black Christian church of her mother.

Conclusion

Anne's account of her life exemplifies the changes that occurred during this time in American history. While her family from home feared what would happen to them because of Anne's work for equality, she continued to pursue civil rights. This dichotomy was not unusual for a woman coming from the Deep South. Anne's family was from a time that searched for survival in a racist environment and trusted in the family-oriented climate of their church that looked to the afterlife for rewards

and pure freedom. Anne did not see the church of her childhood as liberating in any way, but she learned that this same church could work to make change—the same changes that Anne risked her life for during and after her college years. The most valuable lessons Anne learned while she attended college were outside of the classroom in her experiences with the Movement.

Wounds of Passion (1997) by bell hooks (Gloria Watkins)

Author's biography

Born in the segregated Kentucky backwoods in 1952, Gloria Watkins knew from a young age that she wanted to become a writer. Writing and words became her passion from the time she was small. This desire to write is described in Watkins' autobiographical book, *Wounds of Passion*. Through this academic memoir, Watkins, who publishes under the name "bell hooks," shared her memories in the first person as well as many unpleasant experiences in the third person. Gloria Watkins uses the name of her great-grandmother whom she was told she looks and talks like. The reason that Gloria uses the name bell hooks (both un-capitalized) is to disassociate herself from her ego as well as to pay homage to the way that the original Bell Hooks spoke her mind and also practiced humility.

The journey that takes place throughout *Wounds of Passion* does not occur chronologically like Anne Moody's work. Gloria Watkins does include instances from her childhood up through her time at Stanford University, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Southern California, and the University of California at Santa Cruz as well as her appointment at Yale University. The focus for this work is love, both for people in her life and for her writing. The main relationships that Gloria explores are her family in Kentucky and her long time love, Mack, with whom she has shared an open relationship for more than a decade. This relationship creates trials and tribulations for her personally, academically, and professionally. While living with Mack, Gloria discovered much about herself and her abilities.

Her desire to explore black feminism was one that she initially shared with no one. Even though she wrote her first book about the subject at age nineteen, it took over ten years for it to be published. Others were more interested in her playing by the rules. This conflict led to much of her loneliness while a student; Gloria felt that no one understood her. Her Women's Studies colleagues only saw gender and class and ignored race. While her family shared a personal background with her, Gloria's family could not relate to her life far from home in the academic realm. Gloria defied all the structures that society laid out for a young African American woman from the South working in academia.

Education

While education was seen in a positive way by many Black children, that was not the situation for Gloria Watkins while she was a child. Even though she always had a desire to be a writer and felt alive only while reading classic literature, Gloria was not encouraged by her family to pursue education. Her parents made this evident. According to Gloria, "Many of us were told early on that men don't like smart women. My daddy made it plain to mama that he thought all of this book learning I was doing was going to my head—ruining my chances of a future" (ix). Regardless of these disheartening words, Gloria Watkins was able to follow her desire to become an educated person. This lack of encouragement did not only occur while Watkins was a small child, either. She had to deal with negativity about her education throughout her life.

For the people Gloria was raised by, being educated seemed to close more doors than it opened. What was valued in her home was being a wife and a mother,

and these two parts of a woman's identity were considered the most important. When Watkins' mother concluded that Gloria was going to be unable to fulfill this vital role, her mother stated that an unfortunate alternative existed: "She decided for me early on that I would use my mind and become a school-teacher. In those days schoolteachers were always unmarried women" (x). The rural Kentucky community where Gloria grew up did not openly support women in their pursuit of education and found it to be a poor substitute for the desired lifestyle. Even though Gloria did not have support from her family, she still followed her passion throughout her life.

Religion

Even without a strong value for education in her family life, the Watkins family felt strongly about other aspects of life. Gloria Watkins had a family background that included a father "who was always churchgoing" (100). This aspect of her family life created a social structure and rules that accompanied that specific structure. The way in which they lived their lives was prescribed by the profane and the sacred. She recalls, "I had grown up in the hard-core world of Sunday clothes versus everyday clothes" (224). A definite dichotomy was created by the rules of order by which Gloria's family lived in their Kentucky home contrasted with what she found away from that.

The child Gloria Watkins experienced mixed feelings about God. She had an inhibiting view of God and Jesus, believing that her faith would limit her experiences. Due to their Christian faith, Gloria's parents had specific concepts of how a young woman should behave. The text states "Godliness—that is what I thought about....Since I was a girl I was always taught that one should serve and give

without calling attention to the gift" (158). Gloria's parents wanted her to be a giving, Christian woman who acted appropriately because of what she had learned at home. The Watkins family felt that God prescribed a specific way to live, and that they were called to follow that life.

Even after she became an adult, Gloria's parents had guiding principles for her life. Gloria's parents did not approve of her choices: "In my father's eyes, I am really a backstreet woman, living in sin, living with a man I am not married to. Just because I am educated and in college *that don't change nothing"* (66). The Christianity at the Watkins home in Kentucky controlled life, and Gloria did not find comfort in her parents' Christianity. Gloria's parents embraced their religion that provided hope for the afterlife while Gloria searched for improvement and satisfaction in the life she was currently living. Gloria's parents were part of a Southern Black church tradition that, according to Billingsley, felt that "our beliefs and practices were what has been termed otherworldly. Our concern was sustaining ourselves as we resisted the evil influences of this world to survive and overcome it in order to go home to where we would have no more suffering" (3). Gloria's actions did not reflect this church tradition that her parents expected from her.

The restrictions that Gloria's childhood religion placed upon her can be seen in a negative way. Gloria felt she was not able to discover all that life had to offer while being in the controlled environment of the church. The Christianity she knew raised questions about life that could not be answered by the Bible. Gloria recalls thinking, "Or what about First Corinthians and all that poetic way of telling us love is kind and gentle. Nobody says anything about love that can lead to hurt" (8).

Experience, not faith could answer her questions. The life that she lived at home in Kentucky was based around a value system of her parents' Christian church, which shaped their views of the world and what it had to offer. While Gloria lived near her family, she did not fully understand what her life could have in store for her and the other value systems that existed. Only upon leaving home and going to college in California, did Gloria find a freeing way to live her life.

Gloria Watkins found passion within the walls of the church, though. She was inspired by her religion and actively pursued this with extreme enthusiasm:

> To be baptized in the name of the father, son, and the holy ghost, to make one's vow to the lord and not turn back—this is the passion that calls me in childhood. Confined in my small spaces with no light I dream that I have found my true destiny—to be the bride of god, to be a contemplative. Church is one of the few places where I feel a presence of magic. (149)

Gloria's childhood religious experiences were positive in many ways. She was able to experience a passion that many children do not; Gloria found hope in a world that did not always offer hope to young black girls living in the segregated world of the South. Mystery was a factor in Gloria's religious experiences that gave her hope that suffering would not be in vain throughout her life (150). She turned for ultimate comfort to God and religion.

While Watkins was very motivated and comforted by her religion, she also found internal pain because of it. She recalls, "I suffer and through suffering my faith falters. When I pray for rescue no god comes" (151). The passion and desire she felt about religion carried both pleasure and pain, and thus can be seen positively as

well as negatively. The experiences that Gloria Watkins had pertaining to religion in her childhood enabled her to absorb the system of organized religion, yet allowed her to then develop her own thoughts regardless of what she was taught by other people around her. Gloria had a very private relationship with her religion upon arriving at college.

Higher education

Gloria Watkins attended a northern university after choosing to accept a scholarship and enroll at Stanford. Gloria felt that college would bring only opportunities: "When I leave for college, I believe the nightmares will stop, that they are somehow connected to the past I am leaving behind, but they continue" (142). The attitude that Gloria had about college was that it would only bring her good, and her expectation that her nightmares would cease upon her arrival is not the only example of this. She felt that the life at college would be grand; her life would become easier and more enlightened. Soon after her arrival at Stanford, Gloria realized the error of her thoughts. She stated, "Nobody told me leaving home would be like this—that the world would be so full of lies. I thought that when I left home, I would leave the lies behind me, that I would make a whole new world for myself full of clarity and light" (36). Her thoughts were partly naïve, and she felt very emotional about race on her college campus.

Gloria felt alone at college in the fact that she realized that race was an issue in American culture even though many others around her did not. Gloria knew that being Black had a direct impact on her life and what opportunities were given to her or taken away from her because of it, and that was why she carried strong emotions

about race. While Gloria Watkins was very aware of her background and the effect that it had on her life, white people seemed very unaware. According to Gloria:

> I learn to be close but not too close—learn to choose friends who long to journey to the same places I want to go to, who want to find an end to this thing that we call race that divides everything in the world we live in. We want to leave behind our skin—forget about black and white. We want to journey to the heart of the matter. Born and bred in the arms of Jim Crow, in the backyard of the Ku Klux Klan, shrouded in the shade of the Confederate flag, we knew everything there was to fear about crossing boundaries. We crossed the tracks in the name of freedom but we were still afraid... (48).

The freedom that Gloria expected to find was not what she discovered once she arrived at college, and this only left her feeling disappointed and alone.

This loneliness did not come solely from her social experiences with the other students; her professors could not understand her either. This may have been more of a disappointment than the realization that she was not like other students. In one of her first classes, her professor, Tillie Olsen, was not of the same mindset as Gloria. According to Gloria, "She thinks everything is class and then maybe gender. In her class I struggle to speak my awareness against the insistence that being female is all that matters" (98). While Gloria had an awareness that even her professors did not, she was not able to express this knowledge. It made the experience in higher education less fulfilling, yet it also fueled Gloria's later endeavors in writing and education.

Even though Gloria Watkins was aware of issues of race, she also understood the concept of gender that Olsen spoke about. This came from direct experience with Mack, her boyfriend. Gloria was as talented as Mack, but that did not seem to matter. She recalled:

> During the first months of living together we took the same class in medieval literature. Though we frequently copied each other's homework, he always received a higher grade. The white-haired male professor always treated me like I was stupid. As a quiet intellectual black male he always received approval from academic white folks. Not one to challenge the system, he was more accepted. (74)

Gloria was lonely at Stanford. Many African American students feel a connection with the other African Americans on campus, but Gloria could not do this. Her way of life was different from theirs. To Gloria the Black students were different: "They are as foreign to me as the white folks I meet here and often more unaccepting" (60). Because Gloria's background was Southern, being Black did not bring her closer to anyone. To other students at Stanford, Gloria's home state of Kentucky was a joke. She thought life would be better for her while away from Kentucky, yet Gloria did not escape the feeling of being an outsider. Namulundah Florence, author of *bell hooks' Engaged Pedagogy* (1998), agrees stating, "It is a lonely journey. Loneliness pervades hooks' body of work. She recounts her experiences as an outsider—one who knows that what is, ought not to be" (xviii).

While other students returned home for breaks during the year, Gloria could not afford fare back to Kentucky, so she stayed with the black women who cleaned

her dorm. These working-class women were people that Gloria could relate to moderately well. The advice she was given by them was regarding their race and the culture they were a part of. One of the women told Gloria, "'*Don't let those white girls turn you into mammy. You are not there to take care of them, you there to get yours'*. Mine was freedom, which working class blacks believed came through education" (101). This attitude was one that Gloria could relate to more than to that of her peers or professors.

Even while Gloria attended a prestigious school, she did not connect with the other students with the same superior intellect that she had. Many students feel sadness upon graduation—about leaving a great experience and friends, yet Gloria did not feel this way. She stated, "I am simply glad school is over" (104). She did not romanticize her involvement at Stanford and was only too happy to leave that trying experience behind her. This result may be most easily seen in the dissatisfaction that Gloria Watkins felt.

After leaving Stanford, she was again out of place. Upon entering graduate school, Gloria recalls, "In graduate school everything about me is wrong: the way I dress, the way I talk, the way I do my papers, the way I am too affectionate, the way I do not accept the hierarchy (too much challenging of my superiors)" (128). Even though Gloria was at least as intelligent as her peers, she still struggled through the experience, mainly because she was a young African American woman in a white environment made by and for men. While she lived with a boyfriend, he chose not to support her. Mack knew ways to encourage Gloria, but he did not because he was

finding his own success. He was frustrated with her finding failure but did nothing about it.

Even being rewarded with teaching a course on Black women was a bittersweet event. Gloria found comfort in being able to teach in the Black Studies department at the University of Southern California (USC), but her department did not feel as happy about her passion as Gloria did. They all felt "she would do well to focus her attention more on graduate school than writing a book about black women that no one wants to read" (131). Gloria felt her work was important and needed to be written. It seemed to Gloria that the faculty members of the established educational system did all they could to discourage her endeavors because of their loyalty to the racist, classist, and patriarchal way in which they learned and taught. Gloria felt that she was the adversary of everyone at the university. Colleagues should be supportive, but this was not the reality that Gloria Watkins found.

Her struggles became more apparent the longer she was at USC. Members of the faculty seemed to be her enemies. Gloria found:

> She fights with the most powerful professors. She has no idea that they are waiting for that moment when they can annihilate her. Their weapon is exclusion. They definitely intend to see that she does not leave this university with a Ph.D. She has been talked to about her decorum, about not having the proper demeanor of a graduate student. (132)

Education is about opportunity, but doors did not open for her. Because Gloria was an African American woman, doors were being slammed in her face. Her own determination was the only factor on her side, but she was able to succeed even

through the nightmares, daily discouragements, and disappointments. While her committee members told her she had failed with smiles on their faces, she still had to remain resilient through the abuse. Florence agrees, "hooks' life is a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit, one's ability to overcome adversaries" (xvii). Education should be about nurturing and learning, not the emotional and psychological abuse Gloria received in order to fulfill the graduation requirements for a degree. Without this degree, Gloria was not able to perform work she felt passionately about.

Even at a new school, the University of California at Santa Cruz, Gloria was afraid to attempt success in a Ph.D program. She was aware of the consequences. "This time I know that if things go wrong, if I am failed, I will never return to graduate school. All I do is study. I am so afraid. I have such a bad memory" (192). Even though Gloria was once confident in her academic abilities, the educational system forced her to lose faith in herself. Once she felt it was her destiny to become a highly educated writer, but that was taken away from her through Gloria's time in education. The racism that Gloria faced at each institution was not aimed only toward her; other students experienced the same sort of racism. She discovered that failure was viewed differently for white students than Black students:

> Any time one black student has difficulty or fails, every black student that comes after will be seen as flawed and looked at with suspicion. No matter how many white students fail for whatever reason they will still be looked at as individuals. (202)

This knowledge created anxiety within Gloria that could not be expressed or understood by any one outside of her situation. Even though this situation was horrible, Gloria felt that she had no other option to obtain employment than getting this advanced degree. The institutionalized system was created against her, yet she had to depend on it to find success in the world. Because she was a woman, she had to earn a Ph.D in order to survive in the world of academics. If Gloria had not done so, she would have worked harder than the men around her and made much less money. A man could have taught and survived with a Master's Degree, but Gloria would not have been allowed that luxury. She had no choice.

Even when Gloria found success through perseverance, she was still not totally accepted. Once Gloria reached her goal of publishing her first book (ten years after originally writing it), *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Gloria was still unable to be a complete part of the university system she worked within. According to Gloria:

> It's weird to be a graduate student when you have written and published a book. I am respected and at the same a suspect. In academia you are always 'suspect' any time you are not in step with the usual procedures, any time you don't conform. That's why I know it's not the world for me. (230)

Gloria discovered what she wanted from life only after attending colleges for numerous years. All her educational experiences pointed her in the direction she needed to go in order to be happy developing works that reflected her passions in writing about race, gender, and class under the pseudonym bell hooks.

Regardless of her desire to write, Gloria had to perform work within the academic world in order to survive financially and be taken seriously in her work. Watkins had a dissertation to complete. This experience provided hope for Gloria in what appeared to be a hopeless situation; she loved the work she performed on Toni Morrison. She recalled, "The best thing about writing on Toni Morrison is that there is not a lot of primary material available about her work so I have to think for myself. This is such a challenge. It's great" (229). When Gloria pursued work she felt strongly about, her learning was not a chore. She actually enjoyed learning away from the confines of the established institution of learning. This is the sort of reading and learning that Gloria loved as a child in Kentucky.

After Gloria completed the required work in order to become an employable academic, she interviewed for and received a teaching position at Yale University. Gloria was finally rewarded for all the torture she endured even if it was across the country from the life she and Mack shared. She was excited for this opportunity and expected that Mack would have been as well, but Gloria was wrong. Even though Mack seemed supportive in her educational endeavors, he only hurt her again. Gloria recalled, "He's crushed my small moments of triumph, pissed all over my success again and again. It's no good. Somehow he's still trying to keep me the dependent country girl-woman he fell for who was unsure and desperate for him to save her life" (252). Because she was a woman, Mack wanted her to depend on him, not make her own success. Even inside her own home, Gloria did not find the positive encouragement for her work that she desired. Mack wanted to take his

place in the male-dominated world, not to follow a woman to her place even at an Ivy League university.

Feminism & Spirituality

Throughout Gloria's life, she felt isolated at many times because of her ideologies. Gloria looked for ways to empower herself as a woman and a scholar; once she found others with similar views, she found meaningful female companionship that encouraged her free thinking. At this time, women were finally able to come together as part of feminism and find ways to liberate themselves. According to the article "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology" by Judith Plaskow, "Becoming involved in the women's movement means moving from isolation as a woman to a community" (Christ and Plaskow 199). Gloria spoke openly about sexuality, feminism, and sexism with these women, who formed a sisterhood. Gloria was able to find this sense of community with female friends that "struggle with the same issues" (223). This sense of community these women were able to find had a deep sense of meaning for them. According to Plaskow, it could be seen as a religious experience (202).

Gloria and her feminist peers were not alone in this search for spirituality outside of the traditional Christian church to which the Watkins family belonged. "As a result of the shifts that took place in the 1960's and 1970's, this group is more institutionally wary and more concerned to find a religious lifestyle that 'fits,' rather than conforming to a set of customary religious norms" (Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto 118). Gloria and many other women like her were more able to find a place of their own. That place was one that aided women of different races, classes, and

identities to pursue a spiritual environment together that did not force them to feel they were compromising their personal beliefs.

Through all of Gloria's trials she was still full of faith and found God in her experiences. She closed the autobiographical *Wounds of Passion* with thoughts of her favorite saint, Teresa of Avila, and the journey involved. The final thought states, "The story was written so that it could stand alone, two hands raised to glory, that the spirit may descend among us, one hand raised to glory, that the spirit has come—touched me and left my body whole" (260). Watkins finally found an uplifting aspect of her life in the academic realm that she struggled through for years, which was a testament to the positiveness of her faith and spirituality. Gloria Watkins was able to continue her life with a strong faith in God that she felt aided in her journey to where she was.

Conclusion

Gloria Watkins learned at an early age that she had to fight for what she believed in. Gloria had to fight for her education even though it was difficult because she was a young, Black, woman from the South, where family and living life by specific arbitrary standards were important. Only through staying focused and following her desires was Gloria able to get the education she searched for even while she had to challenge the educational system that was in place. During her time in higher education and away from Kentucky, Gloria maintained prior aspects of her relationship with God while turning to new ways in which to find personal liberation and empowerment in a time that many other women of her background were unable to do so.

CHAPTER III, THE FICTION:

Meridian (1976) by Alice Walker

Author's Biography

The fictional story of *Meridian* by Alice Walker tells the tale of Meridian Hill, a young African American woman in the South during the 1960's and into the 1970's. Even though this text is a work of fiction, many autobiographical aspects of the author's life also exist. Alice Walker experienced many of the same conditions of being a young, Black, college-educated woman working in the Civil Rights Movement and voter registration in the South that Meridian did. Alice Walker was born in 1944 in Georgia, the child of sharecroppers who struggled to support their eight children. Like Meridian Hill, Walker was a very good student who earned academic scholarships to attend college. While Meridian graduated from the fictional Saxon College, Alice Walker spent two years at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia on a scholarship for handicapped students. An accident as a child left her blind in one eye and made her eligible for the scholarship. While Walker was a student at Spelman, she was an active member of the Civil Rights Movement; Walker even participated in the March on Washington and met Coretta Scott King. After finding Spelman's rules too strict, Walker transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York and graduated in 1964. While Walker was a college student, she like Meridian Hill had an abortion after becoming pregnant. This experience left a huge impression on Walker and was the motivation for the writing which became her first published book.

After her work as a student, Walker spent much time working as a volunteer with voter registration drives in Georgia to educate the people in rural areas about voting as well as encourage them to participate. Not only did Walker work in voter registration drives, she worked in New York City in the Welfare Department. Upon meeting a white Jewish lawyer who fought for Civil Rights, Walker fell in love, and they became the first legally married interracial couple in Mississippi. These life experiences have fueled much of Walker's literary work. Walker has written short stories, novels, and poetry that all address the issues that Walker has witnessed affecting Black women such as: racism, sexism, and violence. Walker, who has won numerous literary awards, started her own publishing company shortly after winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for her work *The Color Purple*.

Meridian Hill

Meridian's tale is told through recollection and memory, not chronology. The life of Meridian was not easy; she was married, with a baby, while a teenager. She was kicked out of her high school for becoming pregnant and forced into marriage with a man that she did not truly love. Both Meridian and her husband did not enjoy the changes their lives endured due to the birth of their child. Even after Meridian divorced her husband, she wanted to get away from her hometown and her life in it. Only after Meridian received an academic scholarship to Saxon College, did she find a way to escape. Meridian gave her son up for adoption in order to start a new life with a new education even though her mother voiced her displeasure with Meridian's choice of personal fulfillment over duty.

While attending college, Meridian's duty was to the work she did for the betterment of others through voting drives and promotion of Civil Rights. Meridian was unlike any of her peers in the voting rights campaign: she talked to the people she was addressing as individuals, not solely as numbers to fulfill a quota. This ability to relate to individuals was a strong characteristic of Meridian's and enabled her to relate to those in the rural areas of the Deep South. Meridian became so devoted to this cause that she lived sparingly and in whatever housing was available. During much of Meridian's adult life, she was faced with racial issues in her world and was directly impacted by race relations. The love of her life, Truman Held, married a white woman, so the relationships that evolve out of this are in the forefront.

Education

The family of Meridian Hill valued the place of a woman to be in the home and not in a classroom. Mrs. Hill felt that Meridian's life should revolve around the child Meridian had as a teenager. Her mother's response to Meridian giving the child up for adoption was not positive: "Well, it can't be moral, that I know. It can't be right to give away your own child" (85). Mrs. Hill wanted Meridian to stay home and raise the child, not go to college even though an advanced education could have brought a better life for Meridian and her son. When Meridian informed her mother that college was the only chance she had, Mrs. Hill made it clear that she did not care about Meridian's chance for education (85).

The environment that Meridian Hill was raised in was equally as unsupportive of her desire to receive education as her mother was. Once Meridian became

pregnant, she was expelled from school for being pregnant even though no punishment was given to the father of her child. He was able to continue to attend school and even date other girls while Meridian stayed at their home and cared for the child. His life was not expected to change with this double standard for men and women.

While Meridian's mother or the culture as a whole did not support Meridian enrolling in college, her childhood friends chose to support her. It was an opportunity that her friends wished they could have had. Meridian's friend Nelda, who also was a young mother, informed Mrs. Hill of Meridian's intention to attend Saxon College. Nelda stated, "I'd do anything to have the chance to go to college like Meridian. I wish to God I could have made it to junior high" (86). Meridian's friend Delores felt the same: "You have the right to go to college" (84). While many of those around her did not feel as if Meridian deserved this chance, her peers, who had the same disadvantage of being Black and female, felt that college was a choice that Meridian needed to make.

Meridian's friends felt that going to college was an excellent opportunity, and another individual in the community agreed with them. A school administrator named Mr. Yateson also told Meridian that "a unique honor was being bestowed upon her" (83). She was given a scholarship to go to college because of her intelligence, regardless of the fact that she had become pregnant during high school. Even though he felt that Meridian did not necessarily deserve the opportunity to attend college, Mr. Yateson still awarded her the scholarship that she needed to pursue education at a collegiate level. His desire to promote Meridian was not

entirely positive. It was disheartening because of his harsh words. He told her that she "might or might not be worthy; after all, nice girls did not become pregnant in high school" (83). Mr. Yateson did not approve of Meridian.

Not only did Meridian Hill encounter a lack of encouragement for education from those in her immediate contact, other negative factors existed. The media outlets that she was exposed to did not reflect a woman's need for an education. The magazines she read gave her a sense of what a woman should be, and it was not what she was. Meridian wanted more, but "she read *Sepia*, *Tan, True Confessions, Real Romances,* and *Jet.* According to these magazines, Woman was a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on" (68). Not only did Meridian's family discourage her from becoming more than a wife and mother, the outside sources she was reading told her the same.

Religion

The character of Meridian Hill experienced Christianity her entire childhood, mainly from her mother. God and Jesus Christ were major influences on Meridian's mother and the way she lived her life, and Mrs. Hill felt her way of life was the only correct way to live, even if her children did not agree. According to Kelly Brown Douglas' book, *The Black Christ* (1994), "The Black Christian experience has been one in which Black people have consistently confirmed the presence of a sustaining and liberating Christ in their lives" (2). Mrs. Hill sought out Christ as the guiding factor in her life as a part of her daily actions.

Meridian saw how religion made her mother feel compelled to live her life within the strict confines of the church, and this feeling of complete control was not something Meridian desired to feel. She stated:

> Her mother's life was a sacrifice. A blind, enduring, stumbling—though with dignity (as much as was possible under the circumstances)—through life. She did not appear to understand much beyond what happened in her own family, in the neighborhood, and in her church. (74)

This is a life that would not make Meridian happy. Even though Meridian saw the commitment her mother made to Christ and the church, Meridian may not have completely understood the way in which her mother viewed Christ. Mrs. Hill's life was a struggle, but she felt that Christ was associated with this position in life. Douglas agrees with this possibility, "This was the Christ who seemingly identified with a poor Black woman in her day-to-day struggle just to make it" (2). While Meridian saw her mother's actions as blind, Mrs. Hill found a connection between her life's struggle and Christ.

Meridian's view of Christianity is associated with her mother, and Meridian did not find it to be the driving force that Mrs. Hill did. In Meridian's mind, "There were many things wrong with the church, of course" (74). Meridian saw the flaws in the minister and his lack of explanations; for example, Meridian questioned how the story of Jesus' life was told. Mrs. Hill found no such flaws while these aspects drove Meridian further from the church. Meridian was not alone in her awareness of the church's faults. According to Raboteau:

> Studies of the black church written in the 1930's and 1940's by black scholars and social reformers, some of them ministers themselves, criticized the churches for failing to devote more energy to social and economic issues. Many black ministers, they claimed, were reluctant to attack discrimination and preached more about heaven and hell than about the problems troubling their people here on earth. Too many black ministers were poorly educated and ill-prepared to deal with modern change. (105)

Mrs. Hill was a product of the African American church of her childhood in the South where she lived her entire life.

The guidance for Meridian's life was not the same as Mrs. Hill's. The way to a better life (after death) for Mrs. Hill was through the church while Meridian felt that it was to be found today in leaving an environment Meridian felt was too sheltered. Mrs. Hill told Meridian and her friends, "this is a clean, up-right *Christian* home. We believe in God in this house" (88). Meridian's mother embraced a world of God that found value in the status quo, and Meridian could not feel good about this lifestyle.

Mrs. Hill felt the church was holy and the way to salvation, and the rest of the world was not. According to the text, "She thought that the church was literally God's house, and she believed she felt his presence there when she entered the door; when she stepped back outside there was a different feeling, she believed" (74). The church building itself made Mrs. Hill feel closer to God, and that powerful emotion was overwhelming. It was never anything that she could walk away from. For Mrs. Hill, to educate one's self past the church was not as important as being a

part of the great power of God. Meridian did not share her mother's emotions about church, and Meridian wanted to escape and find individual thinking. Mrs. Hill did not search for knowledge outside of her eyesight. Meridian wanted to think for herself and not be like her mother.

While Meridian's father did not control aspects of Meridian's life like her mother did, Mr. Hill still influenced Meridian in her life. Meridian's father was a man she respected for his intelligence, but she felt he was a man that wandered through his life while he mourned it. According to Meridian, her father "sang, beautifully, only of death" (17). His life was not a sacrifice like his wife's, yet Mr. Hill had personal passions in his life. He devoted large amounts of his life to religiously searching for information about Native American life, and this controlled much of what Meridian's father did as well as his outlook on life. Mr. Hill's heart was broken by the way Native Americans were stripped of their land and treated horribly by whites. This sorrow followed him through his daily actions and forced his outlook on life to be miserable. This bleak attitude was reflected in his Christianity.

Even though her father attended Christian services with the family, he did not have the same relationship with and thoughts about the church as Mrs. Hill did. The way in which Meridian's father exposed her to God, Jesus, and the Christian church was very different than her mother's. Meridian recalls, "But for all that her father sang beautifully, heartbreakingly, of God, she sensed he did not believe in Him quite the same way as her mother did" (16). This was a change for Meridian. This gave her the sense that there was more than one way to view God. While Meridian was

growing up, her father's presence at the church motivated her to attempt to embrace Christianity:

> 'Say it now, Meridian, and be saved. All He asks is that we acknowledge Him as our Master. Say you believe in Him.' Looking at her daughter's tears: 'Don't go against your heart!' But she sat mute, watching her friends walking past her bench, accepting Christ, acknowledging God as their Master, Jesus their Savior, and her heart fluttered like that of a small bird about to be stoned. It was her father's voice that moved her, that voice that could only come from the life that he had lived. A life of withdrawal from the world, a life of constant awareness of death. It was the music that made her so tractable and willing she might have said anything, acknowledged anything, simply for peace from his pain that was rendered so exquisitely beautiful by the singers' voices. (16)

The journey of life was one of pain for Mr. Hill. Billingsley explains this view, "—but until then, we would travel through this world of woe doing the best we could" (3). Meridian's father was simply doing the best he could in this world of suffering. Both of Meridian's parents eagerly anticipated the Kingdom of Heaven but acted differently in obtaining it. Mrs. Hill desired to act in a Christ-like way while Mr. Hill trudged through life as a means to an end only. Meridian felt similarly to Anne Moody about being pressured from her family to become an active member in their church. Both Anne's and Meridian's home churches did not fulfill them spiritually.

Higher Education

The experience of college for Meridian Hill was one she looked forward to, yet it was not what she expected at all. Meridian felt that this opportunity would only bring a welcoming and positive life, and she did find that initially. Upon arriving at Saxon College, Meridian embraced her opportunity to learn in a Christian environment: "She *had* felt blessed during her first year at Saxon" (92). It was unlike any place she had ever seen; it was gorgeous and put her in awe at times. This is what Meridian had hoped college would be, yet she was living a lie. Her past experiences could not be made public:

> Of course it was kept secret from everyone that Meridian had been married and divorced and had a child. It was assumed that Saxon young ladies were, by definition, virgins. They were treated as if they were thirteen years old. (93)

In order to stay in school and continue learning, Meridian was unable to be herself.

The Christian life of Saxon was not the experience Meridian anticipated with her idealistic view of college. She hoped that in college she could escape the confines of the church she experienced at home with her mother. She soon found that, "She was still a very naïve country girl who had expected an atmosphere in college that was different from that in her local church. She was wrong" (93). Meridian hoped the environment of the Christian church changed when it changed locations. But Meridian found that the structure of the churches in her life remained constant regardless of her location, and she did not fit into the mold it desired. The church prescribed specific ways to act, to avoid sin and live a life that prepared its

members to be with God. Meridian was expected to resist temptation and remain chaste in order to be an accepted member of her social and religious group.

Meridian was not the only student at Saxon who was forced to display a false exterior; all the young women who were students at Saxon College were expected to be "ladies who acted properly." Saxon was seen as a finishing school for young women with specific rules to ensure they were acting properly. According to the text, "All of Saxon's rules, against smoking, drinking, speaking loudly, going off campus without an escort, remaining off campus after six, talking to boys before visiting hours, remained in effect" (94). All of the social rules placed pressure on the students, and these pressures were not welcomed by those students, which caused an unhappy situation for them. The college's expectations for the women caused emotional distress for the students. According to the text:

> In fact, Meridian and the other students felt they had two enemies: Saxon, which wanted them to become something—ladies—that was already obsolete, and the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society. It was not unusual for a student to break down under the pressures caused by the two. (95)

With the hopes that Meridian and her classmates had coming into college, this outcome was nothing less than a huge disappointment. The students, including Meridian, were not made aware of the entirety of these expectations, which in turn created negativity and fear.

Another aspect of Meridian's education that she was not made aware of in advance was the work she would have to perform outside of the classroom. Even

though Meridian was awarded an academic scholarship to Saxon, other expenses were abundant. During her time of employment for a retired older man, she was forced into a compromising situation, "The truth was, she *was* chased around the desk by Mr. Raymond. The truth was, her scholarship did not cover all her school expenses and her other needs, too" (113). Meridian was placed in a very difficult position because of this fact. She had to allow a former university professor to sexually harass her in order to obtain favors that allowed her to continue to attend a private college in a city. Meridian never expected such a quandary while she attended the glamorous world of college. This is not the only situation that kept Meridian's college days from being full of the ideal outcomes she predicted.

While the young women at Saxon were expected to act like ladies that were pure of action and thought at all times, members of the staff were contradictory in their actions. Due to Meridian's second unplanned pregnancy while a college student, she felt her only option was to obtain an abortion. While Saxon College would never approve of such behavior for one of its students, their former doctor at the school was the provider for Meridian and other students, and he was not ethical in his practices. The event was unpleasant. "Her doctor was the one from Saxon College, only now in private practice. 'I could tie your tubes,' he chopped out angrily, 'if you let me in on some of all of the extracurricular activity'" (119). Apparently, sexuality was appropriate for professional men to force upon helpless college students, but it was a horrible fault for those young women in the same situation. Meridian suffered, and she suffered in solitude because of her gender.

The hypocritical expectations that came from Saxon College were evident in numerous other ways. Meridian and the other women attending Saxon were supposed to be ladies who avoided sin and temptation, and as a result, be good citizens, but that was not truly allowed. Upon attempting to reach out to an orphan child in the city, Meridian was not commended, but ridiculed. Meridian tried to take the Wild Child in, but she was not allowed. Meridian's house mother was vocal in her opinion of Meridian's aiding the girl, "'She must not stay here,' she said gravely. 'Think of the influence. This is a school for young ladies'" (25). Meridian felt her generosity was appropriate, but the college found it troublesome to provide social aid to this homeless girl. Even though the Wild Child had endured rape and homelessness, she was not welcomed onto school grounds even after her death. Meridian and her classmates' attempt to have a funeral in the school's chapel was nixed immediately:

> When Meridian and Anne-Marion arrived at the chapel steps they found the two guards from the gate. The president, having issued his orders, had retired to his Victorian mansion on the hill, and they imagined him peering down at them from behind his Irish lace curtains on the second floor. (37)

Saxon College was not the place of learning and acceptance that Meridian had envisioned it to be. Those people who were supposed to be accepting and nurturing only turned out to be hypocrites.

The Civil Rights Movement

After Meridian arrived at college, she, like Anne Moody, became involved in the Civil Rights Movement and the improvement of people's lives. This was partly due to her infatuation with one of the other workers, Truman Held. Her relationship with Truman continued for years on many different levels. Their relationship was only physical once, but Meridian loved him long before and after that. Meridian became the stronghold for Truman's universe for much of his adult life even after Meridian's life moved on without him. The focus for Meridian's life became a sacrifice to work for civil rights and better the lives of those she interacted with. Rachel Stein, author of *Shifting the Ground* (1997), states "...*Meridian* chronicles the political transformation of Meridian Hill from a suicidal teenager mother who has been defeated by her lack of options within the Jim Crow rural South into a dedicated activist who uses her body as an instrument to protest social wrongs" (87). This became the focus that engulfed Meridian and her life.

This aspect of Meridian's life that she would not have experienced if she had not attended college was this work in the Civil Rights Movement. She became directly involved in helping secure equality for those around her. The Atlanta Movement had a direct effect on Meridian's experience in higher education. While Meridian was unaware of the work for equality during her first year at Saxon College, eventually she found the work too important to ignore. According to the text, "She found it impossible to study while others were being beaten and jailed. It was also, surprisingly, an escape for her" (94). Meridian's campus life at Saxon College was truly enhanced by her work in the Civil Rights Movement.

The work invaded her college campus at Saxon regardless of the fact that the administrators did not welcome it. Meridian learned this in her first instance of volunteering for the Movement. The petition she typed was in regards to a march demonstrating about a recent racist bombing, and one of the workers wanted the petition mimeographed at Saxon. Her response was, "all I know is they won't do it. They won't even let us wear shorts on the Easter egg hunt" (79). Regardless of Meridian's fear that her college's administration would prevent her from doing such work, she was not entirely correct. "The administration of the college neither condoned Saxon students' participation in the Atlanta Movement nor discouraged it. Once it was understood that students could not be stopped, their involvement, as much as possible, was ignored" (94). This political and social issue was deeply embedded in the institutions of higher education, and it affected the students' lives greatly.

Meridian and her peers' most pertinent educational experiences were, like Anne Moody, acquired working outside of the confines of Saxon College, an all Black college for women. Faculty members at the college appeared to be aware of this and aided students while the students were in jail by lying about their whereabouts: "a week in jail became a week on a field trip and was certainly as informative for the students as any field trip could ever be—though everyone knew this was a lie" (94-95). The students learned from these same staff members by their actions because the adults were also spending time incarcerated for the same "crimes" as the students. More of the campus became directly or indirectly involved

in the Atlanta Movement and brought educational experiences to the students and the Saxon staff members alike.

Meridian experienced violence and arrests through her work in the Movement, yet she felt compelled to perform these duties even though she received no encouragement from her mother once again. During Meridian's time teaching people to read and write and demonstrating against injustices, Mrs. Hill did not agree. According to Meridian:

> 'As far as I'm concerned,' said Mrs. Hill, 'you've wasted a year of your life, fooling around with those people. The papers say they're crazy. God separated the sheeps from the goats and the black folks from the white. And me from anybody that acts as foolish as they do. It never bothered *me* to sit in the back of the bus, you get just as good a view and you don't have all those nasty white asses passing you.' (83)

While numerous Black churches were vital in the Civil Rights Movement, Meridian's mother was not alone in her dislike for the work. According to Christiano, Kivisto, and Sawtos, "...black churches were an important component of the civil rights coalition, while members of black sects tended to be averse to becoming activists" (173). The work that Meridian performed was not a noble act in her mother's mind. Because of the environment that Mrs. Hill was raised in, she had specific guidelines that she followed. Billingsley illustrates this: "We were taught to get along with other people, and to obey the rules of the sacred and the secular" (4). Meridian was forced to continue with no support from her mother, who felt the status quo was fine, and Meridian was once again being silly.

Sexism

Civil Rights work was not work that women performed. Meridian discovered through her work in the Movement that it was mainly men who were viewed as Civil Rights workers. She learned that from Truman Held, a worker in the Movement and the love of her life. Meridian stated, "But Truman, alas, did not want a general besides him....Truman would have liked her better as she had been as Eddie's wife, for all that he admired the flash of her face across a picket line—an attractive woman, but asleep" (112-113). Even as Meridian was part of the same cause as Truman, the expectations for her gender were different, and Meridian knew it. Regardless of her desire to create change, Meridian's culture did not find value in her actions as a young woman working as part of the Movement. Nevertheless, Meridian continued to perform work that defied social norms and stereotypes. According to Stein, "In civil actions, Meridian's black, female body—which was historically constructed as subhuman object, or chattel property—is redefined as the agent of social change, moving against the oppressive social boundaries of Jim Crow segregation" (108). Meridian fulfilled roles that most women with common experiences would not. The charismatic leaders of the Movement as a whole were men; Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and Medgar Evers were examples of that.

Not only did the workers in the Movement have different expectations for women and men, the Black church also has a history of treating women's roles differently than those of men. Even though the African American church has provided a family environment to its members, it has not always provided equality for women. Meridian felt that the men in the Movement believed she would not be able

to perform the same tasks because she was a woman. These men were not alone in their thinking. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, "Most significantly, Black churches and Black church denominations have been unable to empower and nurture more than one half of its own constituency, Black women" (4). The church that had raised most of the African American men in the Civil Rights Movement existed with sexism as the norm.

Meridian's work in the Movement became the most important object in her life, even more important than her own health. Upon Meridian's graduation from Saxon College, she had become seriously ill and was unable to eat. Because of this decline of Meridian's physical person, her friend and roommate Anne-Marion decided she needed to get out of their relationship. Anne-Marion stated, "Meridian, I can not afford to love you. Like the idea of suffering itself, you are obsolete" (131). Meridian did not feel that she or her work was obsolete. Meridian's work kept her alive because of her desire to help others.

The life of Meridian Hill was drastically different from the rest of her peers' lives years after she graduated from college as well. Because she had spent so much time working with the Civil Rights Movement while in college, Meridian felt as if no life outside of working for rights existed. This became her life after graduation, and she had to be informed by others that life did indeed change. Truman told her, "Ten years ago, when your kind of protest was new and still fashionable, we *had* to walk. Now we can ride" (210). Truman felt as if Meridian was trying to be a martyr for the cause, and it was not necessary. Change had occurred because of what had been done in the past.

Meridian continued as a college-educated adult to work for others. She had no care for her own health and wanted only to serve others by continuing her quest to educate the illiterate and work for voter registration, even though Meridian had attacks of paralysis that affected her daily life. While performing her work, Meridian lost most of her hair and gave up almost any personal belongings she owned. Meridian lived in poverty after she graduated with a college degree that she had hoped as a single mother would bring her a life better than what her family had. In many people's minds, Meridian did not use her degree for positive ends, even though Meridian felt her work was more important than any house or material goods.

Religion Transformed

Meridian found that the religion of her childhood had also changed. Soon after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., Meridian began to attend Christian church services again. Meridian still had the concept of the Christian church of her childhood embedded in her brain. Meridian felt, "It was unreal to her that people still *came,* actually got out of bed on Sunday morning and came, to church; and she stared up at them as they passed, her mouth slightly open" (212). Meridian had not experienced African American Christianity apart from her home and her time at Saxon College, where she felt the church controlled and limited people. She could not fathom the desire of individuals to continue this behavior if they had a choice. Meridian was also shocked by the way the church service was conducted. She had an epiphany about the minister and the delivery of his sermon. "It struck Meridian that he was deliberately imitating King, that he and all his congregation *knew* he was consciously keeping that voice alive" (214). Even though the national leader for the

Civil Rights Movement (King) was dead, people continued to fight for equality. Raboteau remarks upon "the heroism of the ordinary people who marched, participated in the sit-in demonstrations and boycotts, and risked their lives because they wanted freedom for themselves and for their children" (121). This is the voice of freedom that the minister kept alive; he was aware of the great impact the people in his congregation had. At this time, Meridian realized that there was a direct connection between the church, the social situation of the people, and the change that they felt was needed. According to the text, "Just the 'ah-mens' rose clearly, unsentimentally, and with a firm tone of 'We are fed up'" (215). Individuals within the church were the driving force behind the Civil Rights Movement, and their participation was the key to equality.

So church was no longer the place Meridian remembered. As a child, Meridian had hated church, but aspects of it had clearly changed. She did not recognize even the picture of Jesus. "Instead of the traditional pale Christ with stray lamb there was a tall, broad-shouldered black man" (218). This was something that Meridian had never witnessed in any of her other experiences. The connection between Black Christianity and freedom for its members was evident. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, author of *The Black Christ:*

> From the political arena to the religious arena, these freedom fighters demanded new symbols that would be uncompromising representations of a contagious spirit of Black identity. They called for secular and sacred images that would unambiguously assert the Black community's independence from White control and authority.

> At a time when Black people were 'flamingly assertive and proud,' the challenge to Christianity was clear: the White Christ and its religion had to go. (9)

This was not the Christianity that Meridian remembered from her childhood, because it had indeed changed. Meridian found herself wondering about the function of the church in that day. "Perhaps it was, after all, the only place left for black people to congregate, where the problems of life were not discussed fraudulently and the approach to the future was considered communally, and moral questions were taken seriously" (218). Meridian had never considered that the church she hated would become the church that liberated and aided many within her own culture. The religion Meridian had rejected as a child was now a religion she discovered did meet the needs of those like her.

Conclusion

The church of Meridian's mother had stifled her and made her want to leave it. Re-visiting the church after being away for so long was an enlightening experience for Meridian. Because she had previously felt that the church did not liberate, Meridian had not seen the changes that occurred. While she was one of many making changes through social movements, others were liberating people through the church. Brown Douglas states, "Calling Christ Black not only meant that Christ affirmed Black people in their Blackness, but also that Christ identified with the Black struggle to be free" (64). For numerous years, Meridian had felt that God was not on her side—forcing those around her to suffer—yet others within her community felt they were able to connect with Christ through suffering. This

suffering was one aspect of Christianity that made these individuals feel they were able to relate to God more easily. Meridian learned that politics and religion together found a way to aid the people in her culture. Meridian's eyes were opened to something for which she had long ago lost hope.

Upon rediscovering a church that aided its people, Meridian was able to feel free for the first time in a long time. Meridian no longer needed her relationship with Truman and released a burden she carried for years. Meridian emerged from her sickness spiritually stronger than she had ever been and felt that she had been released from its weight. Meridian's life was completely her own, and she was able to continue on the journey alone.

Through the Ivory Gate (1992) by Rita Dove

Author's Biography

Virginia King's fictional story is the focus for Rita Dove's novel, *Through the Ivory Gate*. Even though this book is a work of fiction, many autobiographical aspects exist as well. Virginia King and Rita Dove share the same hometown of Akron, Ohio with fathers who worked in the tire industry. Rita Dove was born in 1952, and like Virginia King received numerous academic awards during high school and into college. Even though Virginia was not a writer, she and Rita both pursued their individual arts. Rita Dove eventually became the youngest person and the first African American to become Poet Laureate of the United States, as well as the second African American poet (Gwendolyn Brooks was first) to receive the Pulitzer Prize. Dove's broad educational experiences qualified her for the nation's top poet and included two semesters in Germany as a Fulbright scholar and a Master's degree from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. She has been awarded honorary doctorates from more than twenty institutions for her literary work. In addition to writing, Dove has worked as a college professor at multiple institutions, teaching creative writing.

Rita Dove is known mainly for her poetry, but she has also received acclaim for her ability as a novelist and playwright. Dove writes about the personal histories of people like her grandparents, with the importance of family featured in many of her works. She also writes about the experiences of oppressed groups but avoids placing these people into the role of victims. While writing about oppressed groups,

the dichotomy of insider/outsider is prevalent. Symmetry is also important in Dove's poetry and fiction.

Virginia King

Through the Ivory Gate introduces Virginia King right after she graduated from the University of Wisconsin and took a job as an artist in residence at an elementary school in her hometown to teach children about puppetry. Virginia's puppet troupe in Wisconsin broke up and that was the reason she accepted the job in Akron. Virginia was born in Ohio, but her family moved to the desert of Arizona while she was in elementary school, an event which was traumatic to her and her older brother, Ernest, Jr. They both felt that they were leaving their home, and that Phoenix would never match it, for by leaving Akron, the King family left close family ties behind. Once they moved, the children saw their paternal grandmother only once in their new home, and the Kings did not maintain a relationship with Ernest, Sr.'s sister Carrie either. This loss created questions in Virginia's mind that she could answer only upon returning to Akron where she discovered much about herself and her family's past.

Education

Even though Virginia went to college after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, Virginia's life at college as an African American woman was not easy. The University of Wisconsin was a northern school that had been desegregated for years before Virginia attended, but she was still in the minority of the student population. Upon arrival on campus, Virginia found herself drawn to Fine Arts and became involved immediately. While Virginia had an easy love affair with the arts, she was

not as able to create a lasting relationship with a man she loved named Clayton. Clayton broke Virginia's heart with his sexual encounter with another man. Even after graduation, Clayton consumed Virginia's thoughts and hindered her ability to create relationships with other men. Even though a man named Terry pursued her heavily in Akron, Virginia chose a life without him by accepting an acting job in an off-Broadway play in New York City.

During the time Virginia spent in Akron working with the children, she learned about her past and attempted to find what she wanted out of life. Although the time she spent as artist in residence was brief, Virginia learned immensely through this time of active reflection. Dove weaves stories from Virginia's past throughout the entire novel as Virginia allows them to resurface through her interaction with the children and their families. Virginia King's story depicts a Midwest environment very different from the segregated South.

While Virginia King was a child, her family life was guided by the values her parents had. Virginia's family encouraged and valued a traditional lifestyle for women, and they did not believe that this could be achieved through education. The life of the family was vital to achieving happiness. While Virginia was young, her mother informed her, "it's simple arithmetic. The more education you get, the fewer black men you'll meet on the way. But you don't worry. You'll find him" (179). These are not words that encourage an intelligent young woman to pursue a college degree. While it may not have stopped Virginia from going to college, hearing that education was not the best way to find happiness did not aid in her learning process.

The sources of encouragement and the lack of support both were very different for Virginia King than for many other children her age. Even though the people around Virginia did not seem to feel that a college education brought all the important aspects of life to a person, she was still encouraged to learn. Her father was driven to teach his two oldest children, Virginia and Ernest, Jr. Mr. King felt it was important that they knew about other cultures, including the Native Americans indigenous to Arizona. He wanted them not to be ignorant about what others' lives were about. Virginia recalled these experiences from her childhood:

> These were the kinds of drives her father loved, treks long enough for him to construct an interpretation of the cultures described in the borrowed books, spinning out his compulsive version of the rules for leading a sweet and contented life... (137)

Thus, while Virginia did not find complete support for education among the members of her family, she did find the desire for knowledge. Her father embedded in her the desire to know more, and that in itself is an unspoken encouragement to pursue education and its opportunities. While the African American culture that surrounded Virginia did not completely value education, Virginia's father found a way to support learning through his actions and personal interests.

It may have been Mr. King's own desire to learn that silently encouraged Virginia to attend college. Virginia was not the only child in her family to attend college; her brother, Ernest Jr., also enrolled in college before Virginia went. Virginia recalled, "...Ernie had gone off to college—first to UCLA and then to Cal Tech" (51). While Virginia may not have been part of a culture that completely supported women

going to college, she found support within her own family and her male counterparts' desire to learn. Virginia was not completely isolated from encouragement. Virginia's parents did want her to "exercise her mind" and "expand her horizons" (93). Part of the difference in atmosphere and attitude that the character of Virginia King experienced may have been partially due to the time in which she was experiencing college. Virginia's life takes place after the Civil Rights Movement and after the heyday of student activism had ended.

Religion

Similarly, many of the religious experiences that Virginia King had in her childhood encouraged the development of unique ideas. Mr. King found ways to incorporate religious traditions into the lives of Virginia and her older brother. These religious experiences that Mr. King brought to his children were about the value of other cultures' religions. For example, their father taught them, "The Hopis have an intimate relationship with the earth and the spirits that govern nature. They believe a man should never leave the land he was born on, lest his roots shrivel and die" (137). Mr. King's lesson came from the fact that he felt his children did not have the respect for other cultures that they should. He felt this respect was vital, and this lesson was one that Virginia remembered into adulthood; no doubt it had a positive effect on her development.

Mr. King's lesson also made a relevant comparison about children and religion. Once the King family had arrived inside the Navajo Nation, they learned about the Hopi religion and their children. They were informed that "Hopi parents hang kachinas up on the walls so that their children learn to recognize their gods"

(138). Virginia and her brother, Ernest Jr., learned information that instilled in them a sense of the importance of religion and tradition within a culture even if it was not their own. While many parents would not encourage children to know what others believe, this knowledge of religious diversity only produced a positive respect for Virginia and her brother. The King children may not have been aware of the impact at the time, but this incident was one they both remembered into their adult lives.

Another aspect of religion that Virginia knew was the always-present religion of her family. Even though Virginia did not come from an overtly Christian background, her family still retained religious aspects as part of their culture even if solely as a point of reference. To many young people, the Bible's words have meaning at times in relative terms. While recalling an incident from her childhood, "Virginia could hear it as clearly as God pronouncing the Ten Commandments to Moses, each letter burning into the stone tablets" (69). While the King family did not make church life their main priority, it was ever-present in thinking and acting in their way of life. Virginia had Christianity in her life from the time she was young.

Virginia's social life was also embedded in the church culture. When she was in high school and looking for suitable young men to date, boys from church were an option just because they were from her church. While young men from church were not her preference in dating, they were acceptable to her family. She stated, "That left the boys at church" (174). While these boys from church did not possess the social skills that she had hoped for, their status within the organized church community made them eligible bachelors where others outside of the church were not. Because of their common Christian bond, Virginia's suitors were able to date

her. This bond of church life was important to the members of the community, and Billingsley agrees. He states, "Courtship was fostered among the young, a role often played by the church unintentionally" (3). Virginia's home congregation created an environment that prescribed a way of life that had specific acceptable actions.

Higher Education

While Virginia knew of her church community's eligible bachelors, she also had distinct ideas of what college would bring to her. She felt that life would be wonderful once she left home and got to the college of her choice. While she was in high school, she had specific ideas of what college would bring in the arena of dating. She stated, "So this was what college life was like! No more agonized anticipation along the sidelines, praying some guy would come up, any guy as long as it wasn't Elton..." (175). Virginia felt that leaving her old life at home would open new doors pertaining to the opposite sex. She anticipated this and other new social opportunities once she arrived on campus. Even though Virginia had great expectations from her college experience, both positive and negative outcomes occurred.

The positive emotion that Virginia felt about her college experience began immediately. She had a good attitude about it initially. "She loved college for its elusive goals, its fictitious freedom. The instant she had set foot on the green quadrangle outside the dormitory, she'd felt a sharp and delicious thrill" (93). She felt that there were opportunities at college that she had not been able to explore at home. While Virginia's parents desired her to become a professional person, as would be appropriate for someone as smart as she was, this was not what she

planned for herself. Only when she arrived on campus, did Virginia explore her interests: "But far away from home on her National Achievement and Minority Advancement scholarships, Virginia had quickly gravitated to the Fine Arts Building, a brick leviathan from the Victorian Era" (93). By being away from her family and home pressures, Virginia was able to explore what made her happiest. If she had not attended a university away from home that offered fine arts, Virginia may not have had the personal growth experiences she was able to find at college.

Even though Virginia was able to explore more options while at the University of Wisconsin, some opportunities were taken away from her as well. Because Virginia was African American, she was not given all the college opportunities that she deserved or that were given to white students. Upon deciding to pursue the art of mime, she found that her professor discouraged her because he felt that she was endangering her chances in the professional realm. Her response was not docile or what he expected:

> Virginia answered in a voice that surprised even her, because for all its calmness it was very angry. "Since I finished the drama prerequisites and became eligible for casting, there have been four major productions. In the same period of time, there have been over a dozen studio productions, ranging from one-acts to full-length. So far I have had one walk-on in a musical and I played the horse in Cocteau's *Orphee* where, if you recall the determining factors were my experience in dance and the fact that I would wear a horse head. You and I both know how few opportunities there are for black actresses. This university isn't going to write a part just for me, and

> members of this faculty aren't ready to cast a black woman opposite a white man. So tell me: what 'progress' am I endangering? I need experience or I won't get a job, anyway. I could become a good mime if you'd stop stalling and suggest the right teacher for me." (95)

For Virginia, this experience was one that stuck out in her mind. She came to a realization about the racist world she lived in and how the schools she attended directly reflected the values of that world. The difference that divided Virginia's life painfully surfaced.

These racial differences at the school were more evident to Virginia and her Black friends than they were to her white friends, including her roommate Kelly. Kelly admitted to Virginia that "she's never been alone with a black person before" (186). Regardless of this situation, the two became great friends. While the two young women were close, Kelly still could not understand Virginia's situation as a Black woman at a white school. Virginia felt the need at times to socialize only with other African-American young women at the university because of their shared experiences. Kelly could not understand Virginia's need and desire to socialize with those who could relate to her experience the best and often wanted to be a part of this Saturday ritual. Being white and from Wisconsin, Kelly was never an outsider in her life. Whereas Kelly had never had this experience, Virginia found solace in her shared friendships with those who could relate to her experiences:

> How to explain that they needed these once-a-week sessions, needed to be among themselves, to touch base? That if you were scattered like raisins among the white swirls of coeds during the week, it made you feel

> better if you could complain about being caught out in the rain, knowing the others understood how disastrous that was, all the kinks to come out? How could they laugh about getting ash if they had to explain it to a white girl? (187)

Even at a university, where Virginia thought she would have the perfect experience, she was unable to escape the American culture that catered to white people in the United States.

Upon graduating from the University of Wisconsin, Virginia did clerical work only to quit in order to become a part of the puppeteer troupe Puppets & People, Inc. that failed shortly after her start with them. When Virginia took the job as artist in residence at an elementary school in her hometown of Akron, Ohio, she was nervous and scared to go back. She had memories from her childhood, but Virginia knew how quickly life changes. Upon her arrival, Virginia felt that the attitudes of the working-class people in the community would be negative towards her and her work. She thought, "Had she been away from ordinary people so long that she'd forgotten how to adapt? *Smart-ass college graduate,* they were probably thinking" (108). Virginia remembered this culture that she grew up in and what it thought about education. It was important, but a college education did not make Virginia better than those around her.

Even after Virginia graduated from college and was away from the college environment, she still had nostalgic feelings for the experience of higher education. Virginia was more comfortable on a college campus than she was with adults in the

working world. Her visit to Oberlin College, where she was to work after the elementary school in Akron, recalled her emotions about the college experience:

> As she rolled into Oberlin, she began to relax. Students were everywhere, students and bicycles, and both came in various colorful states of disrepair—men in ink-stained windbreakers pedaling balloon-tire bikes, women in long peasant skirts wheeling by on ten-speeds. One girl's jeans were bedecked with patchwork as elaborate as a prize quilt at the county fair. (144)

Just being in the atmosphere of a college campus made Virginia happy. Even though she had been through college and moved on, Virginia's attitude about higher education did not change. She still loved what college was and what it stood for in her mind—opportunity and freedom for young people.

Even though Virginia's love for college was still evident, college had not brought to her life what Virginia expected it to. The endless opportunities did not appear the way Virginia expected they would. She hoped that a life-altering career would come from her degree, but this was not the case. She did not feel the greatness in her life yet. "She had been eager to get into the 'real world,' since she felt she hadn't ever really *lived*. But what was the real world—working as a secretary…? Living hand-to-mouth in a ramshackle farmhouse with a bunch of wonderful weirdos? Teaching kids to tell fairy tales with hand puppets?" (148). Virginia was disappointed with the life she had made.

Virginia's ideas about college did not change from the time she was a child into her post-collegiate days; her desire to teach others in the way her father taught

Virginia and her brother stayed with her as well. She wanted the children to know about other cultures in the way her father taught about the Hopi people in the Arizona desert. What the King children learned about Hopi children had a direct correlation to Virginia's adult life. Virginia's life became completely her own once she returned to her family's homeland of Ohio. The Hopis felt that when people left their roots behind, they would shrivel, not thrive. Virginia came into her own upon learning about her family's past and discovering who she wanted to become, and this reflected what Mr. King taught his children.

Mr. King desired his children to avoid ignorance about other cultures, and this is an aspect of her heritage that Virginia shared with the people in Akron. Virginia introduced *Wayang Purwa* to the children and parents she interacted with in Akron. This form of Javanese shadow play was from a different culture than what the people from Akron, Ohio were accustomed to, and they may have never known of it if Virginia had not brought her expertise with her. Religious aspects of the shadow play existed as well. Much like the Hopi lesson for children, Virginia recognized that the religion and culture went hand in hand, yet she questioned the importance of the information to others around her:

> Should she explain that *Wayang* was a semireligious ceremony? That the solo puppeteer, the Dalang, was a sort of high priest? *Wayang Purwa* with holy myths every Javanese knew by heart and lived with daily, almost like farmers live by the almanac. (160)

This information was important to Virginia, but she was again afraid that the people in her hometown did not value the same information she did. She felt that much of

what these people wanted to know needed to have direct importance to their daily lives. Regardless, religion always seemed to play an important role in Virginia's life as she continued to learn and grow even if the religious experience was not her own. Even if those around her did not see the work of art in the same way that Virginia did, she exposed them to other cultures and religions. This value was not necessarily cultural but a personal value for Virginia. These personal goals stemmed from her childhood experiences and expanded into adulthood.

Conclusion

During her tenure in Akron, Virginia developed an intimate relationship with the father of one of her students. Because of her relationship with Terry, values of family and home within the culture became evident once again. Virginia was expected to stay and make a home with Terry and his young son even though this was not what she wanted. Unlike many women in the community, Virginia still desired more for her life. From the time she was a young girl, Virginia was told that a family with a man was the key to happiness, but Virginia's ideas of what would make her happy had not changed.

The title of this work also gives insight into Virginia's life and connects to Dove's themes. According to Therese Steffen, author of *Crossing Color* (2001):

> Also in tune with the symmetrical structure is the motto *Through the Ivory Gate*. The quote from Homer's *Odyssey* states that those dreams that pass through the gates of honest horn are the true dreams, and those that pass through the ivory gate are glimmering illusions and fantasies. (112)

Virginia's work as an artist and actor made her familiar with the idea of fantasies and the difference between truth and illusions. Much of Virginia's experiences shift between fiction and reality. Passing through these gates can be seen as a rite of passage for Virginia and the decisions in her life. This idea of being an independent woman that has not conformed to the cultural values reflects Dove's theme of being an outsider. Virginia, for much of her life, was an outsider due to the color or her skin. As a Black woman obtaining an education and finding a place for herself outside of being a married mother, Dove tells Virginia's story as an outsider. Virginia reflects on the progress that she has made through the painful disappointments in her life with love as well as education and career in order to become hopeful for the future.

Virginia passed "through the ivory gate" of dreams and emerged confident, knowing what her true place in the real world was. Virginia fulfilled her commitment to Oberlin College for a month before moving to New York City in order to perform the part of a Black militant in an off-Broadway play. Steffen states, "Hers will be a place in the professional world and in her mind where she can delight in being herself" (113-114). Virginia avoided conforming to the cultural values from both her childhood and her adulthood, and instead became an independent woman.

CHAPTER IV, CONCLUSION:

Education

The lives of Anne Moody and Gloria Watkins, along with the characters of Virginia King and Meridian Hill, give great insight into the roles that higher education and religion played in African American culture around the time of the Civil Rights Movement. All four of the protagonists faced adversity while growing up. Each woman wanted an education for herself, and this was an oddity among the people they lived around and were raised by. These women were all taught as a part of their cultural obligations to find a good husband and be a good wife and mother in order to have the ideal life. According to their upbringing, African American women should not want more out of life. Their place was supposed to be in the home, not to learn and grow outside of that through education and life experience. Regardless of this specific cultural value, all four women left their homes in order to fulfill a desire to become educated and obtain experiences beyond what they had known growing up.

For many African Americans, education was viewed as a key freedom because of the lack of education allowed to slaves and others even after emancipation, so learning to read and write was valued. Education was important, but survival became the ultimate issue for many. The basic need to provide for oneself and family became the first priority, so large numbers of African Americans turned to backbreaking occupations like sharecroppers (much like Anne Moody and Alice Walker's parents) in order to survive in a racist environment. The women in these novels were following a value to become free, but were atypical in their quests

for higher education and life outside of their hometowns where a college degree was not viewed as the only way to a great life. Anne, Gloria, Meridian, and Virginia felt college was the only way to save their lives regardless of what those around them believed.

Even after all of these women arrived at college, the place they viewed as their site of "salvation," they found that college did not meet all of the wonderful expectations they had. Even though these four women were able to develop a personal path for their lives at college, each college campus Anne, Gloria, Meridian, and Virginia arrived on did not completely accept them. Being Black women made it difficult to perform well in the classroom because the colleges they attended were racist and sexist and rarely attempted to meet the needs of the students as people. All the students were expected to act in a way that did not directly reflect who each woman was. Even being Black at a historically African American college was not easy for Meridian and Anne. The high expectations these women brought to college placed a strain on their lives that they found difficult to overcome. The time Virginia and Gloria spent at white colleges was not an easy path either. Even though it was seen as an emancipatory experience to go to college, these women found college to be a trying place that reminded them that being Black was not accepted by the mainstream culture in which they lived. People want to feel important to the institutions they are part of, and this was not the situation for these four protagonists. The schools that they all attended did not meet their personal needs, and thus, left them disappointed with much of their college experiences.

A college degree was a double-edged sword for these women. The experience of higher education helped each character to grow, but they each had to experience great pain in order to reach that destination. These four women were not the only college students to become active in making positive changes for their lives. During this time, college students across the country were very involved in activism regardless of race or gender. Young people were integral in making radical voices heard and setting an example for the future. While it was difficult for these women, those following in their footsteps were more able to succeed because of women like Anne, Gloria, Meridian, and Virginia.

Race and Religion

Throughout the lives of these four characters, religion was always present, but it was not always positive and it changed drastically during their lives. The church that had guided so many people made these women feel trapped at times and hostile towards the situation in others instances. The Christianity of these women's parents did not meet the needs of Anne, Gloria, Meridian, and Virginia because it maintained the status quo; these four women were very proactive in improving their lives and the lives of those around them, while the rural churches of the first half of the 20th century were more apolitical.

The established African American Christian churches tended to concentrate on the afterlife and not on change for the better in the present life. The individuals who raised the protagonists awaited their rewards in the afterlife as justification for their suffering in this life and were able to relate well to Jesus because of this shared suffering. Many members of African American Christian churches also felt a direct

connection to Christ because of the way in which they were forced to live. The knowledge that Jesus rose through his suffering and found freedom aided many members of this church to believe they would live in freedom as well, but not in *this* life.

The members of their home churches were often fearful of the consequences of actions that could anger the white majority (especially in the South); therefore, their acceptance of the world around them was often caused not because of agreement, but out of fear. Initially, during times of such political upheaval and great repression, these churches went underground with a focus on survival. This was partly due to the fact that the leaders often did not have the education to lead their congregations in the way in which these four women desired, yet this facet did change.

Educated and charismatic leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged out of the African American churches to lead the members in activism after Brown v Board of Education in 1954. The Black churches in America became an agent for social change during the Civil Rights Movement, and the ministers were natural leaders for the Movement because of their speaking background as well as experience protesting and boycotting. These close-knit groups were motivated to pursue freedom and social welfare by the lack of equality in American culture and the violence that stemmed from the abundant racism.

While this Movement was led by church leaders, the secular was not separated from the sacred in this fight, and King taught the people involved that love and justice would prevail through civil disobedience. Anne and Meridian followed

this ideal with their many arrests and beatings because of their participation in demonstrations and sit-ins to work for their freedom as part of youth-led organizations. The ministers were not alone in their struggle; groups such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were flagship organizations that aided in securing voting rights for Blacks and women.

These family-oriented organizations were a vehicle for survival, but the four protagonists did not realize it while growing up in African American churches. They initially responded by moving away from the church or practicing a private form of religion that reflected their personal need for a relationship with God. All four women discovered that the African American Christianity they were raised by was not the same religion they found after being away from home and developing their lives and beliefs outside of their home environments. Just as the women changed and grew, the African American Christian churches changed as well. Their churches had always welcomed their members with open arms and continued to maintain a family environment, and now they moved into activism and searched for ways to improve the lives of their members much like Anne, Gloria, Meridian, and Virginia did as individuals. The Social Gospel Movement was what these four women found to be an important aspect to church life.

Gender

While the four women found that the African American Christian churches had changed from the time of their childhoods into adulthood through liberation movements that met the spiritual and physical needs of many of the members, one

major downfall existed. The needs of women as a gender were not being met specifically. Within the religious, academic, social, activist, and professional realms, women were still second-class citizens. While white feminism addressed the issue of sexism, the experience of black women was ignored and needed attention. In order for Black women to fully find acceptance as women, a new spirituality through sisterhood had to be created and nurtured. The relationships that Anne, Gloria, Meridian, and Virginia developed with other women of similar backgrounds aided in their personal development and allowed them to mature educationally and spiritually.

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